

The

Ballarat

Naturalist

December 2001



Brown Falcon
(Hill)

Raptors

Speaker: Richard Naisbitt

Richard is responsible for the care and rehabilitation of injured raptors brought to Healesville Sanctuary. Over the years he has amassed considerable first-hand knowledge of the birds he has dealt with, and is hoping to complete a book on the subject.

Rehabilitating a raptor is a complex issue. Much of their hunting behaviour—how and where to find food—is learned, so the methods used must address this. The success of such procedures can be assessed by radio-tracking after release. So how does a Kestrel find a mouse in a field? Birds can see in the UV spectrum; the droppings and urine can be seen at these wavelengths so they provide the clues enabling the kestrel to locate a mouse. (Remember the UV shots in David Attenborough's bird programs?) The Pacific Baza has learnt to spot the red flash on the legs of the green tree frog, seen only when it jumps.

Raptors' eyes have a much faster focussing ability than ours do. While our eyes focus at a speed equivalent to a 24 f.p.s. video, these birds focus at the equivalent of 80-100 f.p.s., enabling them to negotiate powerlines whilst chasing a pigeon. Raptors also develop search patterns in the same way that we might have a regular routine when looking for goods in the supermarket.

The nature of vegetation in the landscape can attract or repel different species. In a cleared paddock, an isolated tree might support two pairs of kestrels. Rainfall, and consequently the height of the grass, is significant: kestrels prefer short grass, while others can cope with longer grasses. When vineyards developed around Healesville, there were fewer open paddocks and therefore fewer Kites.

The Peregrine Falcon however does remarkably well; even though it is a highly spe-



Nankeen Kestrel
(Debus)

cialised bird, it does not build a nest; instead it lays its eggs straight on to rock ledges, in quarries and on buildings. A fast flyer, the only disadvantage of nesting in urban areas is the risk of young birds flying into glass.

Richard's slides illustrated the variations to be seen in the plumage of a species such as the Brown Falcon. With several shots of the Wedge-tailed Eagle he explained how it fills a similar ecological niche to the vulture on other continents—clearing up carrion, and he dispelled the myth of eagles carrying off live domestic stock. We were advised to move road kills such as rabbits and 'roos to the side of the road so that the eagles did not in turn become victims. At Healesville they had found that eagles were difficult to rehabilitate and 90% died.

Commenting on the difference in size between the male and female of some species, Richard pointed out that the adult male Sparrowhawk has to catch a lot of food each day as each female chick requires 2 sparrows daily. The male Peregrine Falcon (450gms) is only half the weight of the female (900gms) and has only a 10% success rate in hunting, yet must find the equivalent of 3 starlings daily for each chick. So when the male of the species is smaller, it has its work cut out feeding a family, especially if there are more female chicks. It is exposed to more risks, resulting in a shorter lifespan.



Black-shouldered Kites
transferring food
(Debus)

We were amused by the habit of the Black-breasted Buzzard which will carry a rock, preferably about 35mm long and white, which it uses to break eggs! Owls are generally doing better in western Victoria than in the east where habitat loss is a problem. Another interesting statistic was that a Barn Owl needs to catch 10,000 mice a year, although in urban areas it is likely to rely on birds instead.

Editor.

Excursion: Inverleigh Flora and Fauna Reserve

Leaders: Dianne Hughes & Neil Anderton

Sixteen members descended upon our staging post, the hamlet of Teesdale, as prearranged. En route Greg Binns, with a sharp eye, picked up a Pallid Cuckoo scavenging a dead grub off the middle of the Mt. Mercer Road. Keen observer Greg also picked up an Eastern Rosella and a Peregrine Falcon between Grenville and Durham Lead, and two Whistling Kites in the same vicinity.

As we passed through Shelford Greg also pointed out, looking north along the valley of the Leigh River, the pioneering Clarke family's mansion "Golf Hill". Along the Shelford Road there are many newer houses, with surroundings in varying states of repair, of returned servicemen, subdivided from Clarke's original holding. Many newly shorn sheep grazed home paddocks.



Whistling Kites
(Hill)

From Teesdale we ventured forth into the Reserve via Common Road. Here Del McDonnell observed a Wedge-tailed Eagle soaring. We were joined by Margaret Rotheram and presently Lyndsay introduced us to Dianne Hughes and Neil Anderton, representatives of the Friends of the Inverleigh Flora and Fauna Reserve. They were well prepared and fielded our barrage of questions admirably throughout the day!

The sun was out and we had abundant warm weather all day. Travelling along the Old Shelford Track, our first stop was at a carpet of Hoary Sunray *Leucochrysum albicans* which looks like an everlasting daisy. Interspersed in the carpet were the yellow flowers of Spur Velleia *V. paradoxa* which our guides said was uncommon around here.

Wandering off into the bush we gloried in the abundant season with many wild-flower species emerged or emerging e.g. Creamy Candles, St John's Wort (used medicinally), Clover Glycine and Bladder Wort. At our second stop 700m further on, Marj Hammond showed us Fringe Lily. Other species observed were Chocolate Lily, Tiger Orchid and introduced species from South Africa, one which looked like Capeweed and the other Veldt Grass which has apparently become a real pest in the hills of Western Victoria.

A dam, constructed long ago, abounded with water birds e.g. White-necked (Pacific) Heron, Little Grebe observed by Kevin Andrews, and Chestnut Teal (no ducklings). A pair of Long-billed Corellas flew overhead and Del reported a Willie Wagtail. Stinking Pennywort grew here—the flowers small and the leaves look like Nardoo. Ken McDonnell pointed to a Bulbine Lily, while Neil saw the colourful Showy Parrot-pea. Greg saw three well-advanced young of a Willie Wagtail in a nest about 3m above the ground in the dead branch of a Manna Gum. He also reported seeing a pair of Superb Fairy-wrens and hearing the calls of White-plumed and Yellow-faced Honeyeaters.

After lunch beside the track we made 3 further stops: at the junction of the Old Teesdale Track, Old Shelford Track and Kangaroo Track; at a locality 0.5km further on, and at Camp Track turn-off. Species noted were Mantis Orchid, Riceflower *P. humilis*, one of the *Hibertias*, one of the *Wahlenbergias*, and Yam Daisy. At Camp Track a pocket of Blue Pincushions had emerged in a secluded clearing.

Here our party broke up; further bird observing included a gem—three Red-browed Firetails at the edge of a little puddle! And some Common Bronzewing Pigeons and a Painted Lady Butterfly were sighted here too.

Tony Johns.

November Meeting Points

- The President, Carol Hall opened the meeting and welcomed 30 members and visitors.
- The position of club finances was outlined and the proposal to increase membership fees at the next Annual General Meeting was explained.
- Approval was given to continue with organization of a camp at Apollo Bay on 10-12 May 2002.
- Ballarat Bushland Book Sub-committee: Most site descriptions are now complete. Members requested to submit names for the book to replace the working title.
- VFNCA Campout: Greg Binns reported on the campout held at Hall's Gap which was attended by 150 people from a good representation of clubs. Good weather ensured that many flowers and birds were seen on the excursions.

Show and Tell.

- Lyndsay Fink: Photographs from Meredith, and Magnetic Island.
- Carol Hall: Photographs of orchids from Mt Beckworth.

Field Reports

- Lyndsay Fink: Black-winged Stilt and Chestnut Teal on wetland near Meredith.
- Del McDonnell: 200 Black Swan at Hepburn Lagoon.
- Greg Binns: At Clunes Swamp, 50 Black-tailed Native-hen, pair of Brolga, Black-tailed Native-hen, Latham's Snipe and breeding Brown Falcon.
- Tony Johns: Collared Sparrow-hawk, and Tony was swooped by Magpie in Drummond St Sth.
- Ken McDonnell: Raven dunking dry food in water, actually held bread underwater.
- John Gregurke: Black-tailed Native-hen seen in Wimmera, 50 at Lower Norton and 20 at Kalkee; 4 Pink-eared Duck near the north shore of Lake Wendouree.
- Gail Whyte: Female Lyrebird at Steavensons Falls.
- Kate Vlcek: Echidna on Otways roadside, pair of Wedge-tailed Eagles on top of Ben More.
- Carol Hall: 15 species of orchid at Mount Beckworth on 21 October.

Mid-month Excursion: Lal Lal Historic Area

Leader: Greg Binns

The site of the old blast furnace at Lal Lal is an important industrial archaeological locality; the remains of the furnace, flues, open-cut mines, tramways and associated buildings can all be found. Illustrated information plaques are positioned along the walking track which itself follows the line of an old tramway along which iron ore was hauled to the furnace.

Seven of us explored the area and Greg Binns' spontaneous tutorial provided an insight into the mining and smelting processes which once took place. Unperturbed by the occasional heavy shower and unseasonable cool temperature we wandered around; *Grevillea rosmarinifolia* had been introduced, but indigenous plants included *Goodenia genticulata*, Milkmaids *Burchardia umbellata*, Prickly Tea-Tree *Leptospermum continentale* and Heath Tea-Tree *L. myrsinoides*, Dwarf Bush-pea and Grey Parrot-pea.

Walking down the road into the valley we found healthy specimens of Austral Grasstree, with great spreads of Matted Bush-peas *Pultenaea pedunculata* in full bloom covering a high percentage of the ground in some places. Grass Trigger-plant *Stylidium graminifolium*, Common Bird Orchid *Chiloglottis valida* and Musky Caladenia *Caladenia gracilis* were special finds, while the Tiger Orchid *Diuris sulphurea* was scattered throughout. Eucalypts included Narrow- and Broad-leaved Peppermint, Scentbark and Manna Gum

We frequently heard the White-eared Honeyeater, Rufous Whistler, Grey Shrike-thrush and Striated Pardalote; we found a Crested Shrike-tit silhouetted on a high branch, saw Yellow-faced Honeyeaters, and caught a split-second glimpse of a Rufous Fantail. Two Koalas were spotted, actively feeding high up, one of them swaying to and fro on a spindly branch.

Standing by the creek we scanned the steep hillside for a Purple Westringia *W. glabra* which Pat and Bill had recalled from an earlier visit, and eventually we spied a straggly bush with a few flowers. (There's a better one in my back garden!!). Carol Hall pointed out a miniature delta formed by sediment washed down the footpath settling at the edge of the creek. Old adits were visible, the shape of their entrances determined by the steeply tilted beds of rock.

Greg kindly used his 4WD to shuttle us up the steep and often muddy road back to the main carpark at the end of a most interesting day. This locality will be a valuable addition to our book.



Crested Shrike-tit

Editor

VFNCA Spring Campout

FNCB members Helen Burgess, Maureen Christie and Greg Binns attended the VFNCA Grampians weekend gathering at Hall's Gap on October 26-28. Camp Acacia was the venue for meetings and some 150 members from affiliated clubs enjoyed a programme arranged by the Ararat and District FNC.

The weather was generally fine and excursions revealed that there were still many delightful flowering plants to be seen. This was particularly evident in the grassy woodland road reserves through Mt. Dryden, Mt. Drummond and around Lake Fyans. The walks near Roses Gap and Goltons Gorge also revealed virtual gardens of flowering shrubs and ground plants. Bird observing was equally rewarding. The enthusiastic and knowledgeable guides were much appreciated.

The Association General Meeting discussed a number of current issues:

- A) Cases of illegal clearing of bush on private and public land.
- B) Box-Ironbark Forest Report: It was agreed that the recommendations should be approved in their entirety initially, then specific local issues on detail be followed up if deemed necessary.
- C) The decimation of the invertebrate research section of the Museum of Victoria; A case for reconsideration to be prepared by Dave King of Geelong FNC.
- D) Response from clubs required on the proposal for an "urban" camp in Melbourne in 2003. Opinions to go to Bendigo FNC.

Greg Binns.

North Gardens Wetland - some recent observations.

Between the beginning of August and the third week of November Wendouree has had 340 mm of rain. This has ensured full water levels in the various ponds of the wetlands and a number of birds are now regularly using the feature. In September I watched a Mudlark gathering mud from the edge of one of the ponds and flying up to the branch of a eucalypt just outside the fence; a nest was half built. In November this same nest had clearly been completed, used and vacated: two young birds were to be seen perched on a neighbouring tree being fed by their parents. Hoary-headed Grebes had also been seen, while a nearby eucalypt sported a pair of galahs checking out a potential home.



Masked Lapwings are regular visitors, as are Pacific Black Ducks; in November I saw 2 pairs of Grey Teal, one pair of Hardhead, 7 pairs of Wood Duck, and a family of swans with 6 cygnets. This time on the muddy shoreline was a pair of Black-fronted Dotterels, and the Sacred Kingfisher has

Editor,

Pat Murphy.



Consider writing a paragraph or two
about your sightings for the newsletter:
we'd love to hear about them.

Calendar

December

- Fri. 7 Meeting: Greg Binns—*Cape York*, Helen Burgess—*Galapagos*.
Sun. 9 Excursion: *Yarrowee and Leigh Rivers* with Gail Whyte.
Sat. 15 BBQ at the Binns, 12 Pleasant St South, 12 noon. BYO meat, drink, chair, crockery and cutlery, and a salad or sweet to share.

2002

Jan.

- Tues. 22 Committee Meeting @ 7.30pm at Lyndsay Fink's,
Tues. 29 Book Meeting @ John Gregurke's 3pm.

Feb.

- Fri. 1 Meeting: Erica Nathan—*Dryland salinity on the Dundas Tablelands*.
Sun. 3 Excursion: *Werribee Treatment Plant* with Greg Binns.

Supper Duty for

February: Del McDonnell & ?
March: Volunteers required.

Committee

President Mrs. Carol Hall
Vice-President Mr. Greg Binns
Secretary Mr. John Gregurke
Treasurer Mr. Bob Curtain

Miss Helen Burgess.....
Miss Maureen Christie.....
Mrs. Claire Dalman.....
Mr. Lyndsay Fink.....

Mrs. Carol Hall (Editor).....
Mr. Les Hanrahan.....
Mr. John Mildren.....
Ms. Gail Whyte.....

Correspondence: PO. Box 328W, Ballarat West, 3350.

Email: Secretary:
Editor:

Website: www.ballarat.yourguide.com.au Click on *Local Info*. Search *Environment*.

Meetings are held at the Ballarat Horticulture Centre, cnr. Gregory & Gillies Sts (VicRoads 254 F8) on the first Friday of the month at 7.30pm.

Excursions: Depart from Creswick Plaza, Creswick Rd., Ballarat (VicRoads 255 M10) at 9.30am unless otherwise specified.

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